The Western World of Llewellyn Perry Holmes – or What a Well-Lived Life Needs

An L. P. Holmes Tribute

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Introduction

Llewellyn Perry Holmes (1895 – 1988) authored forty-eight novels[1] in hardback or paperback, plus a few more exclusively in the pulps. This is in addition to several hundred stories, most of them unpublished since their original pulp appearance.

When reading a Holmes novel, the reader can count on a traditional Western with action scenes—gunplay, fistfights, or horse chases—second to none among Golden Age writers, along with a deeply satisfying romance, strong heroes and heroines, a likable and relatable cast of secondary characters, and certainly worthy villains (some redeemable, some not so). While still at heart Westerns, a few of his novels have a neatly woven-in historical angle: *Desert Steel (*1945; railroad building), *Wire in the Wind* (1951; telegraph building), *Modoc, the last Sundown* (1957; the eponymous war), *Edge of Sundown* (1964; the booming San Francisco of 1851). Among these, *Edge of Sundown* notably features an almost completely urban setting.

Most of Holmes's novels are range novels—the plots he clearly loved best—but he was also fond of several variations: the law subgenre, where the hero starts as a local lawman in town, is hired on-the-spot as an emergency deputy, or is sent as undercover deputy in a far-flung county—*Delta Deputy* (1953), *Six-Gun Code (*1953)[2], *The Lonely Law* (1957), and *Hill Smoke* (1959) excel among these; the mining camp subgenre—where *Rawhide Creek* (1975) stands out[3]; the freighting subgenre, which comes in multiple forms—with mules in the high-country or across plains and deserts, or by riverboats—as seen in *Flame of Sunset* (1945), *Dusty Wagons* (1946), *Gun Law at Vermillion* (1947)[4], *Apache Desert* (1948) and *Hardest Man in the Sierras* (1965), among the best.

In a biographical note added by one of his later editors, Holmes is said to have

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1 From the forty-eight novels, about a dozen were published under Matt Stuart byline, two were originally published as Perry Westwood (*Six-Gun Code,* 1953) or Dave Hardin (*Brandon's Empire,* 1953), and the rest of them as L. P. Holmes.

2 Republished in 1981 as *Payoff at Pawnee* with minor modifications.

3 Though readers should note that the American edition scrambles dozens of pages in the final third (the text remains complete, and careful navigation of the detours makes it worthwhile), while the British edition cuts about 10% (likely the editor's notion of "slow-going" passages). Yet, when read alongside the fuller version, one appreciates even more how Holmes's apparently prosaic sentences—often the very material cut—bring enduring appeal to his novels.

4 For any first-time reader, this will make an ideal entry point: a fast-paced action novel with breathing breaks only during the vivid descriptions of the rugged desert and canyon land in the Nevada–southwestern Utah. As the hero Clay Orde's colorful sidekick Johnny Buffalo grunts, "Tough. Plenty tough. I like 'um on my side."

received, over many years, letters from admirers worldwide—readers who expressed the yearning to inhabit the kind of world he created in his novels. After reading a few of his novels, we come to realize why that is so: while one may turn to them for the vivid, fast-paced action, many will stay for the wonderful relations between characters, for the community building, and for the deep satisfaction born of achieving, after great struggle, a lasting peace through justice.

Holmes is a master at bringing out the simple pleasures, contentment, and meaning one can draw from everyday occurrences: the brief but fascinating descriptions of nature as observed by the protagonist; the pride taken in a job—no matter how insignificant—well done; the relaxing, recharging ritual of a good coffee or meal break; the lingering warmth offered by even the shortest exchange with a friend or good neighbor; and the lifting of the spirit that comes after deserved praise or simply expressed gratitude. Last but not least, the reader may undergo a similar transformation alongside the hero or secondary characters, as they evolve by facing choices and consequences—and learning from reflection upon them. Holmes is unobtrusively a gentle, no-nonsense educator.

> Now he was certain, for the cry came again. From over there where the storm-swollen creek charged and battered furiously. A cry that was desperate and urgent. And there was no mistaking the tone.
>
> That was a woman out there!
>
> Hanford drove into the wild blackness, where instantly all was savage resistance. Wind buffeted him, rain drenched him. In his pinched-down eyes was only the utter dark and the sting of chill, driving moisture. He shouted, reaching for an answer. It came from somewhere dead ahead, as nearly as he could tell.
>
> He smashed into a barrier of willows and fought a blind way through the drenching tangle. Branches tripped him, swung from the blackness to lash him across the face. Again he shouted.
>
> Again he got answer, taut and desperate. Close in front of him now, yet below. He fought on through the willows, beating their stubborn clutch. Without warning he broke into the clear and then the earth dropped out from under him and he was sliding steeply down. The next instant he was chest deep in a surging eddy of swirling creek waters.
>
> Barely did he keep his feet, find footing on the boulder strewn bottom. Scant yards beyond was the hungry, racing crest of the creek, now a savage torrent.... He reached blindly about, seeking hold of anything that might steady and aid him. Bitter frustration and equally bitter anger whipped him. Now he'd be lucky to save himself, let alone aid anyone else, even should he have located them in this black and wild world.

A couple of pages into *Catch and Saddle* (1959), we are thus suddenly engrossed in an explosive unleashing of the natural elements, which threatens the unwary travelers—Clay Hanford, who had just gained shelter in a precarious cabin

one step ahead of the deluge, only to hear someone's ominous cry. These short, clipped sentences—their rhythm mimicking the lash of wind and branch—spur the reader's tension, drawing him deeper into the elemental onslaught.

In the good tradition of the classical novels of Walter Scott or Charles Dickens, the opening chapters of Holmes's works are memorable and gripping. The reader encounters the protagonist during an exceptional event—one that tests him and reveals his heroic qualities. Usually, the protagonist—according to his own lights, at least—has no other choice but to face the danger thrust upon him. We, from the comfort of our armchair, perceive the decision he must make.

Literally on the second page of the novella *The Buzzard's Brethren*[5] *(1941),* we witness the protagonist's intervention to halt a savage whipping—while delivering the aggressor a swift lesson in justice. Holmes swaps the elemental chaos from *Catch and Saddle* for human cruelty as the trigger that reveals the heroic dimension:

> The brute lay strong in Cass Denio. He was enjoying this job and he wanted to savor it to the full. The first blow had shaken the thin frailty of Slip Hankins like a tempest. The second had brought him nearly to his knees. He was weaving on his feet now, a sick, stark horror filming his eyes. And Cass Denio, big, white teeth bared and snarling, was figuring on bringing his victim flat in the dust with the third blow. He had the lash flung out behind him and the muscles of his burly shoulders were bunching for the effort.
>
> Cass Denio never delivered that blow. A sharp hissing filled his ears. And then a slender line of fire cut fully across his face and wound about his throat, half blinding him and filling him with an agony that jerked from his throat in a bawl like a wounded animal. Denio clawed at his face, tore at the lash encircling his throat, and the slender, hard, braided lash burned his hand as it was jerked away from him. Denio spun instinctively to face the source of this sudden, unexpected attack. He saw Rick Dalton, spat a curse, then gave his wounded animal bawl as the merciless lash took him a second time around the face and neck.
>
> "That's right... yell!" rapped out Rick Dalton, his tone as thin and merciless as the lash he wielded. "Open your lungs, you big hawg, and let the world know you're suffering. Not so nice when you have to take it, is it? Two for Slip Hankins...now two for you."

The Plunderers (1955) features Creede Irvine as arguably the archvillain of Holmes's novels. The fistfight between him and the hero, Morgan Ewell—physically overmatched yet unyielding—is epic, equaling any of Holmes's best-depicted fistfights. When we reach the climax, Holmes suddenly switches the viewpoint—there is a third character present who watches the fight. This is a masterstroke: Holmes draws a curtain over the scene—as if to indicate that mere words cannot lift the description to match the climax's intensity—then raises it again, letting us witness

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5 Originally published in the August 1941 issue of *Action Stories*, this stands as one of Holmes's few pulp stories to reach book format, across several editions—sometimes paired with *Wolf Brand*, another excellent novella from the August 1942 issue of *Action Stories*.

the end:

> ...After that the willows held all of it. Stacy saw but little, none of it clearly. Just indistinct shapes surging here and there, the willow brush waving and tossing and crashing as though inhabited by insensate, berserk animals. She heard hoarse, mumbled epithets, a strangled curse or two, but mostly all sound was strictly physical action and violence.
>
> It ended finally. It had to. Stacy heard the finishing blows struck. Sodden, fleshy impacts, the second combined with the sound of breaking wood. After that was only a long silence, a stillness. Then slowly, haltingly, as though deathly weary and barely able to stay erect, the figure of a man came out of the tangle of willows.
>
> It was Morgan Ewell. He was naked to the waist, his arms and shoulders, back and chest streaked and slimed with sweat and blood and dirt. Great livid welts crosshatched his flesh, as though he'd been mauled and clawed at by some beast, some great, berserk animal. Blood seeped from a corner of cut and swollen lips, and one side of his lean face was purpling into a great bruise.
>
> He was starved for breath, and the effort to drag more of it into his reaching lungs was a harsh and labored rasping in his throat. His eyes, bloodshot from sustained, extreme effort, were fixed in a straight-ahead stare. Gripped in one fist he held a two-inch-thick piece of weather-seasoned driftwood, now showing a new and jagged break a foot from his hand.
>
> He might have been a drunken man as he lurched across the little meadow, and he carried the chunk of driftwood with him until he came to his horse, as though his grip on it had been so intense he could not let go. But now he dropped it and fumbled at the canteen hung to his saddle horn. He was only a few strides from where Stacy, pale and wordless, sat her saddle, but she might as well have been on another planet for all the attention he paid her.
>
> He got the canteen free, unscrewed the cap and let gouts of water slop on his head and shoulders. He rinsed out his mouth, spat thickly. After that he drank, with long, hungry swallows. He lowered the canteen, gave a deep, shuddering sigh and leaned against his horse's shoulder. Now mumbled words spilled across his lips, a man talking to himself.
>
> "I got him! By God — I got him! Had to hit him twice with that piece of driftwood to get him down. The chunk busted the second time I hit him. But it — put him down!"

With another masterstroke, we are made to reenact the final spur of action through the telling detail of "a two-inch-thick piece of weather-seasoned driftwood, now showing a new and jagged break a foot from his hand"—and to feel as our own the hero's gasping for air in "he carried the chunk of driftwood with him until he came to his horse, as though his grip on it had been so intense he could not let go."

From Pulp Trails to Golden Peaks

The famed Jon Tuska remarks in one of his short introductions to a Holmes story that "Holmes's Golden Age extended from 1947 to 1957." Holmes published his first four novels[6] in the 1930s, and they indeed reveal a work-in-progress vision and style: a writer still learning his craft, bearing the marks of his '30s pulp productions. His last novel, *Distant Vengeance* (1987), may have been a reworking of a '30s pulp-only tale—stylistically sharper than the early output, yet with a subject matter and artistic vision reminiscent of that rawer period.

The next two novels, *Outlaws of Boardman's Flat* (1941)[7] and *Flame of Sunset* (1945)[8], nearly shed all the blemishes of Holmes's early work. Yet they more than make up for any of those with the freshness of their subjects. *Outlaws of Boardman's Flat*, Holmes's sole depiction of a land rush, devotes about two-thirds of its narrative to it—with the settlers' expectations and apprehensions, the chaotic start of the race, the grueling journey to the opened public land, and the ensuing bedlam at the destination—until finally the claims are recorded. *Flame of Sunset* is equally attractive and almost blemish-free: it opens with a two-thousand-mile cattle drive, followed by riverboat scenes and urban vignettes that convey the vigor of bustling California in the westward expansion era.

All the following novels, published between 1945 and 1960—making allowances for personal preferences among them—represent the writings of a mature writer at his peak. Besides the highlights mentioned earlier for the various subgenres, several standouts in the pure ranch romance genre from this period include *Black Sage* (1950)[9], *Summer Range* (1951), *High Starlight* (1952)[10], *Brandon's Empire* (1953), and *Somewhere They Die* (1955)[11]. A couple of additional marvelous ranch romances must be mentioned as exemplary in their execution, while exhibiting nothing flashy or truly original: *Wild Summit* (1958) and *Catch and Saddle*, from which we quoted earlier.

Two fine novels that cannot be easily classified are *Ride into Gunsmoke* (1949) and *Sunset Rider* (1952). *Sunset Rider* combines elements of a ranch, logging camp, and bustling town-expansion novel on the Pacific coast. It features some of the most beautiful and extensive descriptions of nature in Holmes's novels—the "majestic patriarchs," the redwoods—in their pristine glory. *Ride into Gunsmoke* centers on the homesteading settlers-cattlemen conflict[12] and touches on settlers' efforts to improve their lives, such as building reservoirs and irrigation systems or clearing land. It also stands out among his novels for showcasing a wedding.

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6 Yet readers may be pleasantly surprised by the first half of *Destiny Range* (1936) which foretells the heights to come. These four novels, while on par with the average Western of the Golden Age, stand as valleys only beside the elevation of Holmes's mature works.

7 Later republished as *Roaring Acres*.

8 Originally published as a serial in *Ranch Romances* (1945); book format appeared a few years later.

9 Later republished as R*iders of the Coyote Moon.*

10 At the novel's start, the hero and heroine are already married—the only Holmes novel with such a twist. It's a puzzle that one of his best remains out of print for so long.

11 Winner of the 1955 *Spur Award for Best Western Novel*.

12 *Dusty Wagons*, mentioned earlier, shares this settlers-cattlemen angle.

The Plunderers, *Tough Saddle* (1959), and *Warrior Creek* (1960) form a trilogy —not from a character standpoint, but from the unity of their artistic exploration and vision. Without doubt, these three are his most complex novels, featuring riveting and rich stylistic devices, although not necessarily simply the best or most satisfying overall. In these novels, Holmes probes farthest into the nature of evil and its scale, from incipient to manifestly terrifying. There are long stretches where the viewpoint shifts to one of the villains, and we become privy to his mounting passions, his self-serving rationalizations that excuse them, and his ultimate, unmasked surrender to those desires—dropping all pretensions to himself or the world's judgment as he spirals into berserk acts.

Notwithstanding Tuska's assessment, the fourteen novels published between 1961 and 1982—making allowances for the occasional outlier—remain vintage Holmes, a testament to his enduring skill and mastery. As a rule, they are shorter than the previous novels, and Holmes drops most of the complex devices or angles, including such themes as the Haycox-inspired "two heroines"—among whom the protagonist must fathom the true (for him) one. What remains is the core of his artistic credo outlined at the outset of this tribute, presented in a crisp, no-nonsense, effortless manner, with the trademark action scenes and romance touches.

The aforementioned *Rawhide Creek* is a reworking of the mining camp theme from *Bonanza Gulch* (1949) and *Night Marshal* (1961). He must have been dissatisfied with the results in *Night Marshal* to revisit this theme for a third time, with the end result making it the definitive version—better even than the 1949 first installment. Notably, *Edge of the Desert* (1966) is the only novel where Holmes tells the story from the heroine's perspective; we thus get to see what in all other novels may have been only guessed at—how she interprets the hero's actions and how she views the unfolding events. A few more highlights from this period are *Side Me at Sundown* (1963), *The Shackled Gun* (1963), *The Hackamore Feud* (1964), *The Savage Hours* (1966), and *The Maverick Star* (1969)[13].

The Good Community and Its (Unexpected) Heroes

All of Holmes's heroes are competent and hard-working at their trade, in their physical prime and able to take care of themselves in a fistfight, and usually fair—though not always above average—with a gun. Their sense of right and wrong is neither astray nor self-serving. While minding their own business and not looking for trouble, they are quick to anger at outrageous injustice inflicted on others and quick to side with the wronged party. They all share a no-nonsense decency, a reluctance to harm or kill, and a willingness to offer second chances to those who might still mend their ways. It goes without saying that they will not draw first and that they always give fair warning to their antagonists. When forced into a showdown or self-defense to really hurt—or even kill—someone, they recognize the innate human dignity and brood over the necessity that compelled their hand. The violent and dark moments

13 With the exception of *The Savage Hours*, the rest have been out of print for over fifty years. Mystery is rarely an angle in Holmes's novels (with a couple of exceptions, like *Six-Gun Code*), but I believe most readers will enjoy the challenge of spotting the criminal before the dénouement in *The Maverick Star.*

leave scars on the soul, fostering in them a strong need, in the aftermath, for understanding from others and for warm, healthy human contact. The community and their dear ones recognize and honor them as such. At the conclusion of *The Plunderers*, Stacy puts it simply but as well as anyone could:

> He told her about it. He told her all about it. About Frisco Rudd and how Rudd had died. About Vike Christian asking him to wear the star, and of those explosive, deadly moments in the bank and their outcome. When he finished he waited, watching her.
>
> Some of the color had left her face, and she was staring off into the silver drift of the rain.
>
> She spoke slowly.
>
> "I remember something my father once said to me. In times of emergency, people have an instinct for recognizing true strength and knowing where to look for it. Vike Christian did. He turned to you, Morg. You were the man he wanted, no other. After that, you did what you had to do, and a weak man couldn't have done it..."

While not everyone—or for all time—can match the protagonist's abilities, there are often other characters—seemingly normal folks like most of us, Holmes implies—who can rise when the occasion demands, becoming heroic themselves. In *Summer Range*, the protagonist is saved by the prompt reaction from an unexpected source, the peaceful town lawyer, who startles us—and the ambushers:

> "I've got no gun, Lockyear. But damned if I stand by and see the pair of you gang Fraser. Don't make a break or I go at you with my bare hands!"

In *Brandon's Empire,* only the heroine's swift action and thinking saves the protagonist from certain death— twice, in a short, charged minute:

> ...."Get around the point quick!" Instead, she swung her horse between him and that distant threat. "No!" she cried. "Not without you, Leach!".... He came to a stop below the shelter of the point. "Get down!" he ordered harshly. "I want your horse." She knew what he intended, so stayed in her saddle. "No! You're not riding up there. That was a rifle and you have only your revolver. You wouldn't have a chance. No -Leach!" He caught at her, pulled her from the saddle, tried to put her aside. But she wouldn't stay there. She swarmed back at him, caught hold of him, fought with all her slim strength. -"No!" she cried. "I won't let you. I won't let you go back up there and be shot. Leach you idiot no!" She was half sobbing. She wrapped her arms around him, hung on. Abruptly he went still. "All right," he said. "All right, Dallas."

And in the excellent *Hill Smoke,* when Deputy Haskell arrives incognito in a

secretive remote hill country to trace the previously sent lawman who vanished "... as if he'd ridden off the edge of the world," the town drunk halts a "welcoming committee" from completely caving in the passed-out protagonist:

> They milled about his motionless figure. One leaned over him, boot drawn back for another kick. Before it could be delivered, harsh warning came in from the outer dark.
>
> "Leave him be all of you! Get away from him! You hear me get away from him! Else I turn loose these loads of buckshot!"
>
> Startled, they scattered and gave back. Someone made heavy, panting demand.
>
> "Who's talkin'?"
>
> "I am—Joe Peele. And before you start laughin', think of this. I'm stone sober, and lookin' at you over the old sawed-off Greener gun I packed when I rode stage express. Now get away from that man!"
>
> Thwarted anger flared back. "You turn that gun loose, Peele—and you'll be dead before morning!"
>
> "I turn this gun loose, you'll be dead before that. Move along—all of you!"
>
> Someone said: "Might as well. No point in workin' over this bucko any more; he ain't feelin' nothin'. He's out cold."
>
> "Yeah," taunted Joe Peele, his words raw with sarcasm. "Out cold. After being gang jumped by all you brave boys." Joe Peele pursed his lips and spat. "Yeah—real brave! Like the times you've kicked me around when I was too drunk to help myself. Well, I ain't drunk now, and there's nothin' I'd more enjoy doin' than pull both triggers of this gun. I ain't tellin' you again. Clear out!"

Holmes's deep wisdom about human frailty and the chances one may miss once "a wrong trail" has been taken underscores the need for a character's introspection and recognition of his plight as the key to beginning a turn. No matter how low or how far someone has fallen, he may still have a last chance—and then any helping hand may turn the tide.

There is a very endearing subplot in *Hill Smoke* concerning the "town drunk" and his daughter. Joe Peele, once a legendary stage shotgun guard, is now a disgraced man, estranged from his daughter and despised by all for becoming a bum. There are two events that purport to wake him and restore his self-respect and will to keep it: the first, the scene just mentioned when he saves Haskell; and the second, when Haskell kindles as if a spark in him again:

> Joe Peele, on his feet now, came unsteadily up beside Haskell and peered down at the prone Hayfork rider, his face twisted, his voice shrill."Why don't you put the boots to him like he did to you last night? Dragging me that way—like I was some damned animal on the end of a rope... I" Joe drew back one scuffed, run-

over boot.

"No!" ordered Haskell sharply. "None of that, Joe. Last night, when you ran him and his friends off with your old shotgun, you were the biggest man on this street. You kick him now, you're right down in his class."

Holmes captures how the spark becomes a light through the understated description of the scene between the two later that day:

He left, circling through the alley between the store and the Canyon House, then on across a considerable interval to the river bank, where a raw boarded cabin crouched, gray with age and weather. Joe Peele sat on a bench by the open door. He got to his feet, a little awkward and self-conscious, as Haskell approached.

"Can't remember when I last had a visitor," he said. "Come on in."

On his part, Haskell knew a measure of surprise, too. For Joe Peele was clean shaven, and while the shirt he had on was badly wrinkled, it was clean. Also, the interior of this mean little cabin smelled of hot water and damp wood. It had been thoroughly scrubbed, walls and floor and ancient table top. Joe Peele did not miss Haskell's observant glance.

"I'd have done a better job of swamping out if I'd had a bar of lye soap. Man's in a hell of a fix, ain't he, when he can't even raise the price of a bar of soap?"

Knowing that an answer to this would be more embarrassing than would silence, Haskell said nothing. instead stepped over and picked up the sawed-off, double barrelled shotgun that lay on the bunk in the far corner of the room.

A glance told him that here was a high grade weapon, which, though worn and shiny from long use and handling, was in perfect shape, showing not a speck of rust or of any other kind of neglect. He balanced the gun in his hands.

"Considerable of a persuader, this," he said. "No wonder that crowd cooled off last night in front of it. You've had it a long time, Joe?"

Holmes's novels exhibit a vivid gallery of villains. As one character puts it, for some of them "the slide was greased from the start"—maybe so, but for all there is a progression that Holmes, with keen insight, illuminates throughout the novel. And Holmes is masterful at depicting, in hindsight, that last chance when they could still have saved themselves and others—and their stark willingness to forego it. In *Catch and Saddle*, King Morgan—already responsible for the death of his oldest son and the estrangement of his daughter—is preparing his crew for the final raid of his brutal land-grabbing scheme when his youngest son, Lute, tries to stop it and bring his father to his senses at the eleventh hour. A fight ensues between Lute and his father's new foreman, an overbearing bully. King watches spellbound without breaking it up, and we are allowed to glimpse that fleeting moment:

...His face was numb where Mastick's fists had landed. Sweat blurred and scalded his eyes and blood seeped from his lips. But he flung a challenge, harsh and thick, across the compound.

"Anybody else? Any of the rest of you brave blood-hounds want to try your luck? All right then, damn you, don't try sneering at me!"

They didn't answer, none of them, just sat their saddles stolidly, as he marched past them into the ranchhouse kitchen. King Morgan alone swung his head to watch Lute, and for a brief moment something almost like pride gleamed in the cattleman's bitter eyes. Then this gleam flickered out, as if a door had been closed, and a growling order sent a couple of hands to get Speck Mastick back on his feet and help him wobble to his horse and get into his saddle.

After which they rode out, and from a ranchhouse window Lute watched them go. It was on the high, heavy back of his father that Lute's gaze centered and lingered, while a gust of regret held him still and sad.

In *The Savage Hours*, rumors reach the sheriff's office that a reliable deputy in high-country land—Buck Rodman—may have gone renegade, and special officer Jim Bannion is sent in to investigate the matter. By the novel's end, Bannion has the full picture and proof of Rodman's guilt, confronting him in a revealing scene:

Anger broke in Bannion. Anger at Rodman, at circumstance—even anger at himself. He struck out harshly.

'Why did you do it, Rodman—why did you let go?

'The first time I pinned that on I knew a fine pride. And many times since I've wondered just when and how that great feeling got away from me.' He shrugged and tossed the badge to Bannion. 'When a man dishonors that, he betrays a lot of people, doesn't he? You probably won't believe this, Bannion—but, I'm glad it's over with. Call it that I've been a crook, but not a very good one. Because I haven't enjoyed the feeling. I say again that I had no hand in killing anyone, yet I'm guilty as hell, for I sat back doing nothing about it while such things happened. I don't qualify for a single kind thought. Get it over with. Lock me up. There's a room out back that's served as a jail. I'll give you the key.'

From the ensuing dialogue Bannion gains the full measure of the man and makes a sudden decision:

He tossed Rodman's badge back to him. 'Pin that on again. We got some bad ones to run down. You're going along to back my hand.'

It took a moment for the full import of Bannion's words to strike home. When it did the lines of Buck Rodman's heavy face began breaking up, and his reply ran thick with emotion.

'Goddamn it, Bannion-don't taunt a man—don't taunt him! You can't mean that!'

'I mean it,' stated Bannion flatly. 'Maybe we can get some of the dirt off that star of yours.'

This proves fateful: in the climactic showdown, Rodman saves Bannion's life. The novel closes on a highly charged final scene, where—as Bannion thoughtfully reflects—"Now that it's all over, and I'm looking back at it from a little distance, it comes to me that maybe Buck wanted it the way it happened. Maybe he figured it was the only way to really clean the slate. Anyway, that's how I want to figure it, and that's the way I'm going to report it..."

Justice

The problem of right and wrong is fundamental in all of Holmes's novels. The time setting in most of his works falls immediately after the major land fights have ended, with settlers holding deeds to the main parcels or using free land under a tacit custom of first occupancy. Yet the law has not yet settled firmly in the land: sometimes the nearest responsible office lies a good hundred miles away, sometimes a temporary deputy visits, and other times a local marshal serves the town—or a sheriff with broader authority—but with scant resources to enforce it beyond the borders. As many characters put it: "you have to skin your own snakes." In Holmes's gallery of lawmen, there are corrupt ones, fallen ones who redeem themselves after a jolt, and those true to their badge. In some novels, a judicial figure appears—either a local or itinerant judge, whom Holmes holds to a higher standard because of their added responsibility. They are either out-and-out corrupt or solid, upright figures whose main purpose is to educate the inhabitants about what the law is and the respect it deserves.

The outstanding *Delta Deputy* features a fascinating locale—an island off the coast of California—a heartwarming subplot involving an orphaned twelve-year-old boy adopted by the protagonist, and perhaps Holmes's most intriguing thematic device. The hero of this novel, Deputy Dan Scoville, travels to the Delta island to bring the law. There he meets Cole Logan—the name itself a giveaway—who embodies the quintessential hero of all the other Holmes novels, with a twist. Logan, like his forebears before him, is the strongest man in the country and also a good one: a keeper of order and dispenser of justice. The locals are lucky to have this coincidence of strength and goodness in the same person, for so many generations. It is as if the quintessential hero has not yet learned about the true law, the law having always been just a word in this primeval country, about something far away. Logan is suspicious of Dan Scoville and angered at the presumption of the stranger assuming such a weighty role:

Cole Logan slammed a clenched fist on his saddle horn. "Hell with your puling law! I don't go for that at all. While he lived, my father was the law on Middle Island. Before him, my grandfather was the same. Now, I'm the law! You go on

back to Riverton, mister, and let us handle our own affairs in our own way."

For so many generations of self-reliance, for a Logan the law is the one who is the strongest. As such, he challenges Scoville to a fight to prove that point once and for all. It is the only time in all Holmes's novels when the hero is beaten in a fair, man-to-man fight. In fact, it is not a close match: Logan utterly whips the deputy, although in keeping with his nature, not more than necessary to prove his point:

> ...Dan Scoville was completely unaware of any of this. For he was out on his feet, his eyes glazed, his senses gone. He reeled around, completely helpless. Cole Logan, following, his right fist cocked for another wicked smash, stopped, shook his head, and dropped that poised fist by his side.
>
> "Can't do it," he blurted thickly to himself. "No heart to hit that man again—"

The attitude of the deputy during and after the confrontation shakes Logan's convictions and sets him to wonder and introspection. But the hero of this novel is Dan Scoville, who is able to fathom Cole Logan and educate him. Logan relinquishes his heavy ancestral burden to Scoville and accepts the constituted law: he thus becomes a full Holmesian hero.

If one of the defective traditional definitions of justice was that justice is the will of the strongest, the next defective definition was that of "doing good to friends, and harm to enemies." Holmes takes up this view thematically, front and center, in *Six-Gun Code* and *Wild Summit*. The partisan deputy Ollie Ladd exposes it most fully in a scene with Sheriff Hyatt in *Wild Summit*:

> Ollie's swinging glance finally settled and held on Kline Hyatt, and Ollie blurted things as he saw them.
>
> "This Yeager—what's he to us? We'd had a little more luck, we'd have hung that feller. He's no friend of ours. But Bastian, here, and Mitch and the rest of the combine fellers, they're on our side and we're on theirs. We drink with them in Duke Royale's place, and—."
>
> "Just a minute," broke in Hyatt crisply. He had moved within a stride of this dark, hulking fellow, and now considered him with a narrow bleakness. "That is the only way you see it, Ollie? Doesn't the question of right or wrong, of what's inside or outside of the law enter at all? You see it only as who you think are your friends, or your enemies? Is that as far as you've got this thing figured?"
>
> Under the impact of Hyatt's rapid-fire questions, Ollie's befuddlement and confusion grew. But he clung doggedly to the only point that made sense to him.
>
> "How else you goin' to figure it?" he mumbled. "If you ain't for your friends, who are you for?"

Ollie Ladd proves in the end not to be amenable, but Marshal Mosby in *Six-Gun Code* is: Frank Allard, the man hired by the cynical Mosby to be his night marshal, jolts him back to realize the meaning and responsibility of true law:

> "Ben Ripon says that Mosby surprises him," Barbara observed. "That Mosby seems like a changed man. And that, for a change, he carries his badge as though it really means something."
>
> "Lee's all right," Allard said. "He's found there's more to himself than he realized."
>
> The girl threw a quick, slanting glance up at the rangy, solid man beside her. "Strength," she murmured, "so it has been said, can give off strength."

Among the most special of Holmes's novels is *The Smoky Trail* (1947)[14]. At a casual reading, this is a very attractive adult fairy tale in the good tradition in which the protagonist travels through fantastic lands to fulfill his labors, meeting extraordinary personages who either fight him or help him in his tribulations-including a good king and his wholesome daughter. But on this frame, Holmes reenacts the ancient challenge "to prove that the most just among men can still be happy, by virtue of his justness alone, even if he would have for all the fame of the most unjust one and would suffer as such a one."

We find at the story's beginning that Dave Wall is, for the entire world, the blackest villain—"his name used to scare little children." Softening the protagonist's predicament—no human being could sustain such a fate for any sizable time alone and remain sane—Wall's only sister, her husband, and their children are the only ones who know his true greatness and sacrifice, sustaining him for another day of his ordeal.

A fateful encounter lifts Wall from his paralysis and launches him on the long journey of redemption from the underworld to the light. Holmes indicates the impossibility of the ancient challenge: there may be endurance, but no happiness in such a case. The hero needs the world to see at least part of his true justness, so he has "to regain his good name" for any claim at personal happiness.

Conclusion

Holmes took to heart the role of any good literature as being both entertaining and edifying for his readers—his novels can be equally enjoyed by schoolchildren and adults. His is a deep wisdom, both of human frailty and of human greatness: the themes of the good community and justice are central to his artistic vision. But alongside the weighty, there are everyday occurrences: in his novels, we find light-hearted scenes, humorous ones, "unexpected pieces of wisdom" delivered from a surprising source, or fleeting characters making poetic remarks.

In any of his mature works, we get glimpses of what the well-lived life consists of: the warmth of the family, the strong ties of a just community, the inspiration and companionship of friends, the recognition of human dignity in others, the quiet pride

14 Later republished as *The Crimson Hills*.

in following one's calling to earn one's bread—and, last but not least, the willingness to do the right thing according to our powers, to take a stand in dangerous or even the darkest moments the world around us may face. A good community may need a hero in a time of crisis—to keep it good—and the hero can be honored adequately only by such a one. But the hero may also need the help of others.

I believe the first-time reader may enjoy any of the highlighted novels, but I would not be surprised if fans of Holmes's world have a favorite different from those featured here.

Appendix 1: Notable Pulp-Only Themes and Stories

Holmes's pulp stories feature some themes found nowhere else in his work. I believe that for his readers, the most pleasant surprise would be the rodeo tales, which are set in the 20th century—although the exact time setting is left vague. These stories really bring to life the excitement of the arena and the skills of the riders, along with the fulfilling romance and fights.

> ...Watch the chute! Lee Shelly, comin' out on Ghost. Good luck, Lee! Yuh're a real champ!"
>
> When the import of these words hit the crowd, a roar started, then quickly died. The crowd grew still. They saw those struggling men about the chute. They saw Lee Shelly climb over, lower himself into the saddle.
>
> They heard the coughing, spine-chilling grunts of the outlaw horse. They did not hear Lee's fateful words, "Cut him loose!" But they saw the maddened white projectile that exploded into the open when the chute gate slammed back. And they saw the lean figure astride that projectile and went howling mad with released tension.
>
> It seemed to Lee Shelly that the horse cleared forty feet in that first explosive leap...[15]

"Lady of the Hounds," *Ranch Romances*, 1st November 1942, is a magical novella—the heroes are the orphan Nesta, her pack of faithful hounds, their wise leader Drum, and "...Buck, the big, silent, fighting airedale..." This is a good original story, in which the dogs play a large role in thwarting the schemes of a venal sheriff. Another fine story where an animal plays a leading role—this time a horse—is "Mesa Justice," *Leading Western*, April 1945.

During his lifetime, Holmes republished in book format only a couple of short stories in anthologies and two novellas (noted earlier)[16]. These two novellas, together with the posthumously republished *River Range*, are all excellent range stories. But there are other range novellas of similar quality left in his pulps to be rediscovered[17].

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15 This electrifying daring-ride appears in "Mountain Rider," *Rodeo Romances*, December 1947. Similarly fine are "Outlaw Dust," *Lariat Story Magazine*, May 1938; "Gilded Spurs," *Rodeo Romances*, Summer 1950.

16 See footnote 5 for the two novellas republished in book format during Holmes's lifetime.

17 A sample: "Skyline Trail," *Ranch Romances,* May #2 1944; "Bleak Hazard," *Best Western Novels*, August

Appendix 2: A Bibliography of Holmes's Novels[18]

Title	Year	Alternate titles
Roaring Range	1935	Trouble Town
Destiny Range	1936	
The Law of Kyger Gorge	1936	
Gunman's Greed	1937	Bloody Saddles
Outlaws of Boardman's Flat	1941	Roaring Acres
Flame of Sunset	1945	The Sunset Trail
Desert Steel	1945	Desert Rails
Dusty Wagons	1946	Savage Guns
The Smoky Trail	1947	The Crimson Hills
Gun Law at Vermillion	1947	Painted Walls
Water, Grass and Gunsmoke	1948	Range Pirate
Gun Smoke Showdown	1948	Saddle-Man; Free Winds Blow West
Dead Man's Saddle	1948	Orphans of Gunswift Graze
Apache Desert	1948	
Bonanza Gulch	1949	Bloody Bonanza
Ride into Gunsmoke	1949	Deep Hills
Black Sage	1950	Riders of the Coyote Moon
Wire in the Wind	1951	Nevada Rampage; Singing Wires
Summer Range	1951	The Fight for Bunchgrass Basin
Sunset Rider	1952	Fugitive Gun; Once in the Saddle; Redwood Country
High Starlight	1952	
Six-Gun Code	1953	Payoff at Pawnee
Brandon's Empire	1953	
Delta Deputy	1953	
Somewhere They Die	1955	
The Plunderers	1955	
The Lonely Law	1957	
Modoc, the Last Sundown	1957	
Wild Summit	1958	
Catch and Saddle	1959	
Hill Smoke	1959	
Tough Saddle	1959	
Warrior Creek	1960	
Night Marshal	1961	
Smoky Pass	1962	
The Shackled Gun	1963	
Side Me at Sundown	1963	Showdown Beyond the Pawnee Rim
The Hackamore Feud	1964	
Edge of Sundown	1964	
Hardest Man in the Sierras	1965	
Edge of the Desert	1966	Lady of Battle Mountain
The Savage Hours	1966	
The Maverick Star	1969	
Showdown on the Jubilee	1970	
Rustler's Moon	1971	
Rawhide Creek	1975	
Shadow of the Rim	1982	
The Distant Vengeance	1987	

1948; "Scourge of the Hangrope Horde," *Three Western Novels Magazine*, May 1949; "High Haven," *Ranch Romances*, September #1 1951.

18 This bibliography includes those published in book format; several more from the '30s remain pulp-only. Some novels were first published serially in magazines, in which case the year reflects that appearance.

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